

# Vacation From War

Dialogues across Borders



## Dialogue Seminars and Youth Encounters 2019

### Conflictual and Encouraging

While the participants in the dialogue seminars try to take the perspectives of the „Others“ and together look for strategies of conflict transformation, politicians like the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, through announcing the annexation of the Jordan Valley in case he wins the election, continue a spiral of violence; and conflict resolution seems in the far distant future.

It is all the more impressive when participants, such as Yael\* (name changed), encouraged by the seminar, don't give up in spite of the political situation: "Before the seminar, a conflict solution seemed unattainable to me. Now I know that we need hope and have to be convinced that solutions are possible."

This year, for the first time in the history of the project, someone who lives in the Gaza Strip – Nour\* (name changed) participated in the women's seminar: "You have given me the opportunity to open my heart and my mind to people whom I was afraid of", she describes her experience of the seminar. Nour's insights and positions particularly en-

riched the seminar. "I brought my message to the Israelis, they heard it and I believe that they will pass it on." A detailed interview, in which she shares her story, will be in our annual report.

Apart from the Women's seminar, in the Israel-Palestine part of the project, the Allgenders-seminar took place as planned with new partners who combined the political narrative approach with the method of nonviolent communication. It was an exciting and moving pilot seminar and we hope that this partnership will continue to develop positively.

In the meantime, the theater and youth groups with whom we were able to hold the Allgenders-seminar in 2018 continued to implement further follow-up activities up until this summer: in addition to regular meetings, both discussion workshops and small theater performances could take place despite the difficult and tense political situation on the ground.

In the former Yugoslavia, the peace camp in Split, Croatia was characterized by very intensive thematic workshops and new guests and topics. As in previ-

## Vacation From War 2019

### April 2019

100 YU-Peace members traveled to Sombor for a weekend visit.

### June 2019

In Khan Younis (Gaza Strip), *Vacation From War* once again supported Summer Games for 60 Palestinian children.

### July 2019

In Split, 120 youngsters from Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia met.

### August 2019

In Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje, 70 YU-Peace members met for one week and discussed and planned joint activities.

### August 2019

Near Cologne, 58 young women\* from Israel, the Palestinian Westbank and the Gaza Strip met for intensive conversations about the conflict.

In late August, 58 young men\* and women\* from the Palestinian Westbank and from Israel came together at the same place for dialogues.

### September 2019

50 members of „YU-Peace“ visited their friends in Tuzla.

Our new Website is live! Visit us at [www.vacation-from-war.com](http://www.vacation-from-war.com)



“Hate can only survive through lies and prejudice. As long as we love, hate has no power.”

for her dignity.

Serbian human rights activist Sofija Todorovic impressed everyone with her reports on campaigns for women's rights, against nationalism and for the rights of the LGBTIQ\* community.

"Ajna has conquered our hearts, but Sofija has given us the kick we need to be active ourselves," one participant said afterwards.

How inspired the youngsters were became obvious on the penultimate day of the encounter, on which the young people themselves were able to offer

workshops about topics they find especially interesting and important. In addition to a dance group, there were eight different thematic workshops. Two young people took Sofija's words to heart and offered a workshop on LGBTIQ\* and gender identities; it was the first time that participants chose to discuss this topic intensively in our encounters.

ous years, the war and its aftermath were at the center of the peace camp.

For many young people, the encounters are the first opportunity to talk about the war, get factual and unbiased information – and to find out that there is not just one “truth” about what happened. The workshop with Ajna Jusic, whose story and that of her mother became famous through

the film “Esma's Secret”, was particularly moving. Ajna talked about her organization “Forgotten Children of War”, which campaigns for the rights of people who, like themselves, were born after mass rape in the war. Nobody talks about it, but to this day they are disadvantaged by law and socially discriminated. Everyone admired Ajna for her courage to deal openly with this situation and to stand up

“One way of resistance is: showing that we can do this!”

*Yael R.\* (name changed) grew up in a religious and conservative family near Tel Aviv. A large part of her family lives in settlements in the occupied territories and position themselves politically on the right. The first time she engaged critically with the conflict and the occupation was during her college studies. In this interview, she shares her motivation for participating in the women's\*seminar and how she experienced the dialogue process.*

Yael R. : (...) Some years ago, I met Palestinian woman from East Jerusalem at my university. I remember that during the war in Gaza she showed me pictures and videos of what was happening there. This

was the first time I heard someone use the words *resistance* and *activists* instead of *terrorists* and *terrorist attacks*. That changed me a lot. (...) And I remember that she said to me: "A true friendship is a friendship in which you can share everything about yourself in honesty." She explained to me: "If we exclude politics and do not talk about it, this is not a real friendship." (...)

Until then, I had never voted, but now I took part in the last election in April for the first time. I will continue to vote because I believe that pessimism and the feeling that there is no solution are exactly the things that the government wants us to feel. Our prime minister

wants us to be afraid so that he gains more power. (...)

**T.P. : What was your motivation to come to the seminar?**

Y.R. : Before the seminar, I had the feeling that I was avoiding the conflict between the Palestinians and Israel, i.e. if I saw a headline in the newspaper, I just read the headline and that was it. So far, this has been too complicated and confusing for me, because on the one hand I am in favor of human rights for all people, Palestinians and Israelis alike, but on the other hand most of my family lives in settlements on Palestinian territory.

The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is a very painful topic

in Israel. In the seminar, I wanted to face the political situation, delve deeply into the conflict, also emotionally, I wanted to hear the stories of people from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, so that from there, I could get involved by my own conviction.

**T.P. : What were your experiences here during the seminar?**

Y.R. : I didn't have great expectations, I was open to listening and excited to see what would happen. I didn't expect that we would find a solution to the conflict. In the first phase of the dialogue process, I primarily wanted to listen to the stories. I also talked a bit and shared my views, but I didn't have a set opinion.

After that I processed and finally something happened. (...) I am sure that we have had a very significant process together in the past few days and that we are all a bit shocked by it, in a positive way.

Because initially there were some conflicts within the Israeli and Palestinian group. For example, some women did not feel free to express themselves, because we have different opinions and different backgrounds. It was very important for some women to be able to speak about their fears and to share their identity and stories. For others it was necessary to question these narratives; to understand

that they are not real.

After sharing our stories, pain, and fears, I felt that a safe space had been created to ask very tough questions. (...) One of the moments when I felt how narratives were being deconstructed was when one of the Israelis said, *"We are growing up with the fear that if you say 'all of Palestine, from the river to the sea', this means that only the sea remains for the Jewish people and we as Jews no longer have a place in Israel / Palestine. And we fear that it is not enough for you to have only parts of Israel."* A Palestinian replied: *"We grew up with the counterpart of the same story. With all your settlements, with conquering and occupying, we have less and less space. We grew up on a side where you want to kill us and drive us out of here."*

When I heard both stories – that are the same, only told from a different perspective – I felt that neither was real. (...)

As we discussed solutions, I realised what was happening in our group: Sharing the pain and stories, recognizing the „Others“, then a feeling reconciliation and healing. When each group set their own goals for resolving the conflict, they were very similar. (...)

At that point, I felt that we really could take the other person's perspective and start speaking the

same language. (...) It was incredible, to reach this point at which it was no longer about *him* or *her* and *me*, but rather *we*. (...)

A solution seemed unattainable to me before the seminar. Now I know that we need hope and have to be convinced that solutions are feasible. Because if we believe that everything is an utopia, there will be no change. (...) To show that we can do it and to say: "I am very aware about the political situation and especially as a woman I know that we have the strength to show compassion and love" is *one* way of resistance.

**T.P. : What are your plans for the time after the seminar?**

Y.R. : The bigger goal for me will be to join political actions, i.e. demonstrations, including those in the Palestinian Territories.

As a smaller goal, I aim to talk to my friends, sister and cousin about the seminar. And convince others to come next year because I feel that we were allowed to create something very special during the seminar and I think that more people should be part of it. (...)

I also want to tell about the amazing women here and share their stories. And I want to stop avoiding the issue of the conflict, i.e. read the reports in the news and watch political films etc.



Israeli participants discuss steps on a way to a transformation of the conflict



## Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina

„We have to talk about war and violence in order to not repeat the mistakes of the past.“

The twelve days in Split were the most beautiful and valuable experience of my 16 years. I met many wonderful people with completely different attitudes towards life than most of my fellow human beings.

The workshop on the war photos by Ron Haviv and the workshop with Ajna provoked very strong emotions in me and I would never have believed that I could show them to so many people. I was touched, sad and horrified by what happened in our countries during the war.

Sofija's workshop on human rights and activism showed me that there are people in this world who stand up for others and for themselves. I admire her for her wisdom and courage.

In the workshops, I lost the fear of speaking in front of the group and learned how to express my opinion and help to create peace.

*Anja A., Sombor, 16 years old*

I am happy that I was able to go to Split and I became a new member of this huge family. I met a lot of wonderful, smart, and like-

minded people and I have never before seen the kind of community we created in those twelve days. These friendships will last a lifetime.

The young people from different cities told their stories; many of my generation had never heard of the tragedies in these areas: how many victims there were, how many innocent civilians were killed. The workshops opened our eyes and made us aware that we have to remember the past in order to be able to change the future.

I admire Ajna for her courage – standing in front of a large number of people and telling her life story. I draw my hat for Sofija. Where many people would have given up long ago, she takes her conviction to the streets because she knows that she is doing the right thing.

Ron Haviv is an extremely brave man who risked his life to give the world a glimpse of the horrors of war in the Balkans. His photos have also changed our consciousness.

*Sofija K., Sombor, 17 years old*

## Donate and support

The project *Vacation From War* is funded almost exclusively through private donations. Together, many people make our work possible and secure our political independence.

Many donors collect donations at family celebrations, but also give in memory of loved ones or distribute information material in their circle of friends or at events.

This is all the more important for us in these times, as especially travel and accommodation costs for participants rise year by year, while donations don't grow at the same pace. Getting more people interested in the project is important for the continuation of our work.

We are happy to visit your parishes, peace groups or other initiatives and share experiences about *Vacation From War*!

**We gladly send you our Annual Reports and Bulletins free of charge.**

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## Donation Receipt

Donations to the project are tax-deductable. Please put your address under „purpose of transfer“ in your bank transfer. In January of the following year we will then send you a donation receipt.

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